

Environmental Development and Changing Rural Life in Japan¹⁾

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Résumé

In older days most rural inhabitants in Japan lived in a small and closed village called 'mura' on the basis of self-sufficient economy, and various aspects of the rural life were interrelated intimately among patriarchal and lineal families called 'ie'. Though living standard of farmers was low and miserable, they could spend their peaceful and idyllic lives.

Since the Meiji Restoration rural life itself has been changing greatly. Especially since 1960 its change is conspicuous. Productivity of farming has greatly improved, but the difference between agriculture and other industries has enlarged. Penetration of commodity economy has been breaking down self-sufficiency and exclusiveness of the older village.

Though standard of living is rising, such a rapid change of life environment has produced many sorts of contradictions and many life requirements. Such requirements can be classified into four types such as those for convenience, comfort, stability and serenity. In order to satisfy these requirements, we shall need a fundamental reorganization of life system.

1. The old type of rural life

Rural life in Japan is recently changing even its fundamental structure. To understand this changing process, I am going to cite characteristics of the old type of rural life at first.

The old type of rural life in Japan, as we can find its example during the Edo period, can be characterized as follows :

(1) Rural economy on which lives of inhabitants depended was self-sufficient chiefly by rice crop agriculture.

The hot and humid climate of summer is favorable for rice crop agriculture in Japan. Because the rice crop is more abundant than any other crops in calorie and nutrition, it can support more population per arable land than other crops, and the Japanese in former days had a food custom of taking too much rice diet. And the inhabitants used to satisfy their needs by what they made by themselves.

(2) Most rural inhabitants lived in a small and closed village called 'mura' (village community).

The Japanese village was a primary place of production and life, and it had a high degree of closure and exclusiveness. Within it many social relations were accumulated. Professor Eitarō Suzuki called such a village 'shizenon' (natural village), which was autonomous and self-reliant.²⁾

(3) Social unit constituting such a village was a patriarchal and lineal family called 'ie'.

The small farmer system in which a lineal and patriarchal family had a small lot of

land farmed only by the members of the family was already in existence about 1700 during the Edo period. As a rural family took a form of lineal and patriarchal family, a kinship relation in a rural area was characterized by the patrilineal relation of so called 'dōzoku' consisting of 'honke' (main family) and 'bunke' (branch family) inside the village.³⁾ Thus various aspects of the rural life were interrelated and interdependent closely and intimately inside the village.

(4) There were two main social classes in feudal society. The one was 'samurai' (warrior) class which was the governing class and the other was common people which was the governed class. While the 'samurai' class was gathered in 'jōkamachi' (a castle town), in rural areas there were only common people most of whom were farmers.

In accordance with the feudal regime there was a fixed ranking of 'ie' so called 'kakaku' within the village. Families of the village were divided into class-stratifications such as 'omodachi' (leaders), 'hirahonbyakushō' (main farmers), and 'mizunomi' (dependent farmers).

(5) The living standard of farmers was low and miserable because of many natural disasters and the exploitations by feudal lords. The farmers had to pay high land taxes which were equivalent to 40% or 50% of their products. And farmers were affected by fluctuation of the nature. There were, for instance, 82 times of famines or food shortages from 1615 to 1870 in Morioka-han.⁴⁾

In spite of low and miserable lives, they could spend their stable and secure lives in accordance with traditional and homogeneous way of life.

2. Change of agriculture as a basic condition of life

Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, capitalism has developed rapidly, political and administrative system has been reformed several times and scientific technology has progressed remarkably in Japan.

As for agriculture as a basic condition of life, the tendency of transition from self-sufficient agriculture centered on rice crop to commodity producing agriculture including some cash crops or some stock raisings has been strengthening since the Meiji Era.

As an example, I will cite a village we surveyed in 1955.⁵⁾ Mukasa-buraku at Mikata-cho in Fukui-ken is situated on the coast of the Japan Sea. Formerly this village depended mainly on rice crop and partially on sericulture and charcoal-production. And its life was largely self-

Table. 1 Farming areas of rice crop at Mukasa

	1912	1955
are		
~10	1	15
10~	1	5
20~	6	6
30~	9	7
40~	20	22
50~	20	13
60~	24	19
70~	16	6
80~	10	7
90~	—	3
100~	—	5
110~	—	6
120~	—	1
130~	—	—
Total	107	115

sufficient. After World War II, the farmers in this village introduced some stock raisings such as Japanese cows (14 households), milky cows (9), sheep (16), pigs (4) etc. And they also introduced some cash crops such as leaf tobacco (12), rush (6), etc. The size of the farming areas of rice crop at this village is shown at Table 1. In 1912, most of the farmers were concentrated around the average area of 59 areas, but in 1955 we see a tendency to concentrate toward both extremities.

Since after World War II, the agrarian reform in 1946 had swept away the tenant-landlord system, and most of the farmers became independent owner farmers. Changing percentage of owner farmers and tenant farmers in Japan is shown in Table 2. Before 1940, there were a lot of tenant farmers, but after 1955 most of the Japanese farmers became owner farmers.

Table 2. Percentage of owner farmer and tenant farmer in Japan

	Owner farmer	Owner and tenant farmer	Tenant farmer
1885	33.4	46.0	20.6
1920	30.7	40.9	28.4
1940	30.5	42.2	27.1
1955	69.5	26.4	4.0

The farmers on those days had strong desires to improve their farmings by utilizing new agricultural medicines, chemical fertilizers and farming machineries in order to solve the problem of the shortage of food supply in Japan of that period. And the productivity of farming has been greatly improved.

Since about 1960, the situations surrounding Japanese agriculture have gradually changed. Gross National Products has increased more than 10% annually. The amount of imported agricultural products has vastly increased. The results have been decreased relative importance of domestic agriculture in national economy. The difference in relative importance between agriculture and other industries has enlarged more and more. Even the principal labor powers in farming such as heads or successors of farmers' households have flowed out from agriculture to other industries. Numbers of farmers' population and farmers' households in Japan have been decreasing since 1950 as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Numbers of farmers' population and farmers' households

(unit 1,000)

	Farmers' population		Farmers' households		Percentage of professional farmers
	Number	Index	Number	Index	
1950	37,650	100	6,175	100	50.0
55	36,431	97	6,175	98	34.8
60	34,411	92	6,057	99	30.8
65	30,083	80	5,665	92	21.5
70	26,280	70	5,342	87	15.8
75	23,195	62	4,953	80	12.1

Resource: Agricultural Census.

Hence the Agricultural Structure Improvement Program started on the basis of the Fundamentals of Agriculture Act (nōgyo-kihō) in 1961. It aims to decrease the differences between agriculture and other industries, to foster the self-supporting farmers, to raise agricultural productivity, to realize selective enlargement and cooperative farming and to modernize agriculture itself. Though this program and other programs for improving agriculture have had some desirable results, they can not prevent the emergence of a lot of farmers with side-businesses, while some professional farmers oriented to commodity producing farmings are rising. Percentage of professional farmers has been also decreasing as shown at the last column of Table 3.

At present it might be said that the Japanese agriculture is confronted with a sort of crisis. Most of the farmers seem to feel somewhat uneasy about the future of Japanese agriculture because of curtailment of rice crop as a remedy for over-abundance since 1969, and because of the oil shock of 1973 and the economic depression at present.

3. Environmental development around rural life

Environmental development around rural life is also conspicuous corresponding to the agricultural change.

Geographical and occupational mobility of rural population has been increasing. Life space of rural inhabitants has more and more enlarged as a result of the recent remarkable development of road net-work and of the increase of automobiles, telephones and television-sets etc. Thus closure and exclusiveness of the village community is breaking down. At present rural inhabitants must depend on their urban centers for most of their basic needs.

In order to explain the tendencies of rural areas to depend upon cities, I cite findings of a research we did in 1971.⁶⁾ In this research we sent questionnaires to 102 'shōkokais.' Shōkokai is a leading institute of commerce and industry in a rural area. Eighty seven shōkokais returned the questionnaires to us with complete responses. Purchasing and facility using places of the rural inhabitants are shown in Table 4. It can be seen in this

Table 4. Purchasing and facility using places of the rural inhabitants

	Satisfying inside of their own villages or towns			Depending upon cities outside		
	Primarily	Secondarily	Degree of self-sufficiency	Primarily	Secondarily	Degree of dependency
Daily necessity	80	5	1.90	4	90	1.15
Eating house	55	18	1.40	25	74	1.46
Permanent commodity	37	31	1.21	46	72	1.93
Tea drinking	55	18	0.70	51	60	1.91
Zoo or botanical garden	24	8	0.65	71	41	2.16
Expensive article	8	34	0.65	90	52	2.45
Cinema, theater	4	1	0.10	90	52	2.78

- Notes: (1) Degree of self-sufficiency is calculated by giving score 2 to 'primarily,' score 1 to 'secondarily,' and then by dividing the total scores by 87, the number of sample.
 (2) Degree of dependency is calculated by giving score 2 to 'primarily,' score 1 to 'secondarily,' and then by dividing the total scores by 87.
 (3) Number of depended cities can be over 87, because of multi-answers.

table that daily necessities of the rural inhabitants are mostly satisfied in their own villages or towns, but they must depend expensive articles or cinemas and theaters upon cities outside.

Penetration of commodity economy into the rural life is going to drive out the self-sufficiency of the families and villages. Nowadays farmers must buy most of the things they want to get with money except only a little food they can afford. The rise of the living standard and rationalization of the rural life are evidenced by the building or rebuilding of houses, in increased purchase of domestic machines and electric appliances, change of fuel from wood to LP gas, equipment of water services etc.

Diffusion of durable commodities in rural areas is remarkable as shown in the following Table 5. Yoshizukuri-buraku in the left column of this table is a pear growing village near Toyama city on the coast of the Japan Sea in Hokuriku District. We surveyed it in 1975. The other village, Baba-buraku, in the right column, is a rice growing village near Haramachi city, on the coast of the Pacific Ocean in Tōhoku District. We surveyed it in 1974. We can see the degree of diffusion of durable commodities especially electric appliances is very high.

Table 5. Degree of diffusion of permanent commodities

	Yoshizukuri (1975)	Baba (1974)
Electric refrigerator	98%	97%
Electric washing machine	98	97
Electric cleaner	94	69
Color television set	94	88
Telephone	97	27
Automobile for riding	75	69
Piano	9	1
Number	161	75

As mentioned above, the environmental development of the rural life in Japan can be characterized as the increasement of side businesses, the development of commodity producing farming, the enlargement of life space, and the rise of living standard.

4. Reorganization of life system and life requirements

Such a development of life environment requires a fundamental reorganization of life system. But such a rapid change of life environment as happened in Japan cannot but produce many sorts of contradictions and many life requirements. These requirements can be classified into four types such as requirements for convenience, comfort, stability and serenity.

The transition from the closed and exclusive life system based on tradition to the open and wide life system based on rationality is progressing rapidly. But it has not been completed in Japan yet. When those who lived in a narrow and small space are thrown suddenly into a large and open space, they will have some troubles and some requirements

for convenience. We might define the search for convenience as the search for a route from village life to wide social life or as an effort to adjust to the new life system. Farmers' desire to possess automobiles which have become prevalent since about 1965 seems to be a form of this requirement. To the question: "Do you feel inconvenient concerning traffic, road, daily shoppings and going to farms?," we got the following results as shown in Table 6. There are not so many who feel inconvenient but the farmers in Yoshizukuri to go to their farms. And there are some differences between farmers and non-farmers, and also a little differences between Yoshizukuri and Baba.

Table 6. Feeling inconvenient

	Yoshizukuri (1975)				Baba (1974)	
	Farmers	Non-farmers	Total	Number	Total	Number
Traffic	2.3%	20.2%	11.5%	87	6.3%	71
Road	7.0	31.9	19.6	87	3.8	71
Daily shopping	4.7	20.2	12.7	87	20.0	71
Going to the farms	58.2	—	58.2	43	13.8	65

It can be said that the requirement for comfort is the desire to achieve the higher standard of life and to escape from the lower and more miserable life of old times. It was not until recent times that Japanese farmers could be released from poverty and

Table 7. Newly or re-building of houses in recent ten years (Yoshizukuri, 1975)

Main house	59	36.7%
Detached house	16	9.9
Partially rebuilding		
Toilet	49	30.4
Bath room	58	36.0
Kitchen	61	37.8
Number	161	

misery. The rise of their level of living is evidenced by the recent prevalence of re-building of houses and of purchasing domestic machines. Table 7 tells us how pervasive the farmers' interest in rebuilding their houses is. In recent ten days the numbers of newly or re-building main and detached houses are 36.7% and 9.9% respectively.

These desires for conveniences and comforts can be exploited upon by capitalists in their efforts to sell more of their merchandises to farmers. Capitalists will consider rural districts as a very good market for selling their commodities. On the other hand, rural life is extraordinarily unstable owing to the fluctuation of prices of agricultural products except rice crop and owing to the difficulties of farming due to price rise and inflation of these days. Farmers at present feel uneasy about their farmings and their lives, because of the cheap and unstable prices of farm products and the inflation, as shown in Table 8. Therefore, it is natural that the desire for stable life should emerge among farmers.

As capitalism has penetrated into the rural areas, a lot of social problems have arisen, such as environmental pollution, destruction of nature, traffic disasters, rise of land prices, phenomenon of depopulation, lack of successors of farmers' households, the problem of support of the aged, etc. Thus the peaceful and idyllic rural life is going to disappear

Table 8. Feeling uneasy for farming and living (Yoshizukuri, 1975)

	Professional farmers	Farmers with side business	Total
Feeling uneasy for farming	60.0%	53.8%	57.0%
Feeling cheap for price of farm product	64.3	51.3	58.2
Feeling unstable for price of farm product	82.2	87.8	82.5
Number	45	41	86

	Farmers	Non-farmers	Total
Feeling uneasy for living cost	81.5%	84.0%	82.8%
Feeling unsatisfact for living	11.6	22.7	17.2
Number	43	44	87

from the present-day of Japan. Farmers feel uneasy also about environmental pollutions and disruptions and about the security of life as **Table 9** shows. We can see in it a number of inhabitants feel uneasy about environmental pollutions and disruptions. So rural inhabitants' desire for serenity is becoming more and more serious.

Table 9. Feeling uneasy for environmental disruptions and security of life (Yoshizukuri, 1975)

	Farmers	Non-farmers	Total
Disruption by farming medicines or fertilizers	16.3 %	15.9 %	16.1 %
Traffic troubles	20.8	34.1	27.6
Prevention of crimes	18.6	25.0	21.8
Medical system	2.3	18.2	10.4
Security for old ages	27.9	45.5	35.6
Number	43	44	87

As we have seen, there are various requirements in the present rural areas in Japan. Developments of environment hitherto made is not necessarily desirable for inhabitants. How rural inhabitants think about the environmental development of present day is shown

Table 10. Thinking about environmental development (Yoshizukuri, 1975)

	Male	Female	Total
Present development is:			
(1) Very desirable, and so it has to be promoted positively	11.1 %	2.0 %	5.7 %
(2) Good for improvement of rural life	27.8	19.6	23.0
(3) Not good for inhabitant	36.1	41.2	39.1
(4) Very bad because it is only for large enterprises	8.3	9.8	9.2
(5) Other answers	5.6	3.9	4.6
(6) No response	11.1	23.5	18.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	36	51	87

in **Table 10**. It is necessary to resolve these contradictions, to satisfy the requirements, to restore the vivid and peaceful life and to rebuild a new rural community. These are the difficult and important problems put before us.

- 1) This paper is reformed and modified from my report at the Fourth World Congress of Rural Sociology on August 13, 1976, at Torun, Poland.
- 2) Eitarō Suzuki, *Nihon nōson shakaigaku genri* (Principles of Japanese rural sociology), 1940.
- 3) Kizaemon Ariga, *Nippon kazokuseido to kosakuseido* (Japanese family system and tenant system), 1943.
- 4) Bonsen Takahashi, *Tochi, shokuryō, jinkō shuyōryoku to jinkō seisaku hasseiiji no tokuchō ni tsuiteno oboegaki tsuzuri*, 1960.
- 5) Akihiko Hasegawa, *Nōson shakai no kōzō to hendō* (Structure and change of rural society in Japan), 1974, pp. 205-208.
- 6) *Ibid*, pp. 125-127.